

AHA Statement Opposing New Policy on Virtual Scholarly Exchanges in India

Approved by AHA Council, February 5, 2021

The American Historical Association registers grave concern about a new policy issued by India's Ministry of Higher Education/Department of Higher Education, which requires Indian scholars and administrators to obtain prior approval from the Ministry of External Affairs if they want to convene online or virtual international conferences, seminars, or trainings. This new requirement applies not only to online academic events that relate to the security of the Indian state, but also to those that are "clearly related to India's internal matters," a guideline so sweeping that it encompasses most topics of interest to scholars of India.

Because of the pandemic, many scholarly exchanges that in normal times would involve foreign travel now take place online. This new policy therefore is likely to affect a wide range of scholarly exchanges that are critical to the free international expression of ideas. By monitoring and potentially censoring or cancelling the virtual and online communications of scholars in India, the Ministry of Education threatens the very foundation of those exchanges. The policy puts Indian scholars at a disadvantage in ongoing discussions among scholars in all disciplines, including history. It also deprives scholars in other countries (including members of the American Historical Association) of the benefits of the knowledge and insights that Indian scholars bring to the table.

The AHA strongly maintains that government agencies should not intervene in the content of scholarly exchange. Such intervention would constitute arbitrary censorship and violate the principle of academic freedom.

The AHA is the largest organization of professional historians in the world, with over 11,000 members spanning the globe. On behalf of this international network of scholars, we respectfully urge a reconsideration of the policy requiring Indian scholars and administrators to receive prior government approval for online or virtual academic conferences.